Paradox and Persistence The Figurative Sculpture of Audrius Janušonis

Article by Anthony E Stellaccio

Those who attempt to make a religion out of humanism, which recognizes nothing greater than man, do not satisfy my emotions. And yet I am unable to believe that, in the world as known, there is anything that I can value outside human beings... And so my intellect goes with the humanists, though my emotions violently rebel. ~ Bertrand Russell

ATTRACTION HAS BECOME BEAUTY AND POETRY, CURIOSITY has become intellect and invention, competition has become politics and war and the need to survive has become a tapestry of metaphysics and meaning that cannot possibly be unravelled. Everywhere I look I see that we humans have clothed a base instinctual nature in the most elaborate costume, found our reflection in everything and indulged to excess in the theatre of our own existence. Humanity, as a result, is a self-modelled and unparalleled work of art, a tumult of collective imagination and individual actors and a production so elaborate that it justifies itself. Still, humanity is deeply contrived and I have never been able to reconcile this inescapable absurdity with my need to find meaning in life. But of course, that is a central paradox of humanity and one that makes the unceasing conflicts that we allow and the struggles that we endure seem that much more bizarre and tragic. Indeed, the human drama is a ubiquitous and often painful phenomenon but its reenactment in the work of Audrius Janušonis is poignant and redemptive.

Travelling by degrees of magnitude, Janušonis' studio is a raw, no-frills space in a small, easily overlooked city that is about one-and-a-half hours from the capital of a small Baltic country. The studio is part of a Soviet-era high school for the arts, one of only a few that have survived and where Janušonis' tenure is indefinite. Inside there is a table where the artist chain smokes in between answers that occasionally slip into rebuttals, a rack of CDs where Frank Zappa maintains a place of importance among the *avant-garde* and the obscure, a couple of intimidating old kilns and shelves upon shelves of finished and unfinished sculptures that take up the larger part of a small space.

This compulsively cramped but unassuming studio where Janušonis is holed up, holding out and holding on is three things: First, it is a place (on the outskirts of the fringe) where Janušonis is probably most comfortable. Second, it is a small fortress in which the stacks and piles of work that wedge him into mere slivers of his work space have become battlements. Third, it is a theatre where dialogues of

Take a Rib, Make a Woman. *2010. White clay and glazes, fired at 1000°C. 86 cm/h.*

accumulated figure sculptures become the scripts for future exhibitions.

From any other vantage point than this, Janušonis is a conundrum. On the one hand, he is highly visible, participating in international symposia, residencies and high profile exhibitions such as Judith Schwartz's *Confrontational Clay* and a recent solo show at the Musée Ariana in Geneva, which was followed by a feature on the cover of *Neue Keramik*. On the other hand, Janušonis is an inconspicuous observer, a reluctant recluse, a skeptic, an introvert and a nonconformist who seems uncomfortable with any type of social accord. As a skeptic myself, I had always thought of this paradox as the marketable product of a clever self-promoter and the facade of a carefully crafted persona. Yet, one has only to step foot into the artist's work space to see that Janušonis, having dispensed with any shred of comfort or propriety, is driven only by a haunting and insatiable compulsion to create. Indeed, when questioned about his intentions as an artist and the fate of his finished work, Janušonis seems genuinely perplexed, the central purpose of his sculpture being to fight a singular battle with the demons of unrelenting inspiration.

The compulsion that pushes Janušonis to create is most evident in the haste of his surfaces. Pushed, pulled and pinched into shape, the artist forcefully embraces the clay with a locative immediacy that skirts playfulness and violence. Clay and contact, a free form and aggressive modelling, become turbulent bodies, desolate and tempestuous oceans of flesh that threaten to engulf serene or pensive and tenderly modelled faces. The faces of his human figures are often his own, anonymous children, or that of the *Venus De Milo*, the 'mother of all sculpture' and they are often taken from moulds. The juxtaposition of the two elements, together with Janušonis' spare but sensible descriptions and distortions of the body, underscores one of Janušonis' particular abilities; that of flawlessly binding the expressive and the classical while leaving the apparent emotion and intellect of his figures at odds.

This central conflict between the emotional and the intellectual is something that also plays out externally in Janušonis' work as his characters find themselves in various quandaries. For example, in the piece entitled *Take a Rib, Make a Woman*, a polished, robust and disproportionately large bust of Charles Darwin sits atop a diminutive, disagreeable, haggard and ascetic body of troubled flesh. The figure holds the rib of Adam close to its body but the schism between an overgrown intellect and lust, perhaps lust for another or lust for a humanising faith, is equally disproportionate. In somewhat of an opposite scenario, Janušonis' *Coca Cola*, a Madonna, her graceful body eroding and her face ethereal,

Coca Cola. *2008. White clay and glaze fired to 1000°C. 80 cm/h.*

Above: ***Call Me 2.*** *2006. Stoneware and glaze, fired to cone 11. 50 cm/h.*
Below: ***Morning (Faun Series).*** *1999. Red clay with glaze, fired to 1000°C. 38 cm/h.*

takes pleasure in the superficial; a bottle of Coca-Cola finished, almost spitefully, with a plastic straw. We ascribe serenity and tenderness to her name, we find it in her expression and we are drawn to her by her shape, her colour and surface. Yet, with a single and defiant act of the most trite self-indulgence, she is humanised, she is material, she is fallible and she is lost to us. With the collapse of our illusion, so goes our hope for salvation. In Janušonis' *Faun* series, gaunt and grimly rendered figures become forest spirits, conceal themselves behind trees, loll on branches and even tote guns in some unknown battle for mystical territory. Then, in a moment, with the tragically comic addition of an otherwise insignificant pair of Mickey Mouse ears, Janušonis transforms them into caricatures of our degraded imaginations that threaten to hopelessly derail human *mythos*.

In all of these works, the power and economy of Janušonis' sculpture is evident as he demonstrates his ability to elicit complex feelings and ideas and to upset their balance with the simplest gestures. To think, however, that Janušonis has accomplished some difficult task might be to overlook something essential about human beings that the artist is trying to express – that our complexity is precarious and we are frighteningly fragile.

In using his characters to portray the internal and external discord that, for all intents and purposes, defines humanity, Janušonis shares much with the theatre, literature and fables that inspire him. Yet one fundamental difference is that unlike the narratives that inform him, his sculptures are stills, single moments, like photographs, that are frozen in time. Although a figure might stand poised to fatalistically choose a course of action or to resolve its predicament through dialogue, Janušonis' sculptures remain on the brink, always stopping short of resolution. I do not, however, believe that Janušonis, as a person or as an artist, is interested in resolution. For Janušonis, man is inherently conflicted and the inability or terminal unwillingness to find resolution is what indefinitely prolongs the dialogue that humanity has with itself. This is precisely the dialogue that I believe the artist has with his creations and which his creations, as they gradually assemble in his studio, have with each other. Then, as narratives form, exhibitions take shape but the drama does not end and conclusions are never reached.

From the persistent dialogue of Janušonis' figurative sculpture, I have often speculated that it is the role of the animal to give us respite. Whether it is a wild hare or an ancestral ape, the animals in Janušonis' work are recesses of moral and existential indifference. In his piece entitled *March, April*, for example, a pregnant female figure is shadowed by a poodle, which stands on its hindquarters, resting its front paws on the arch of the woman's back in a gesture ambiguously consoling or oppressive. Whatever the relationship, the bond between the two characters seems to be that the woman carries the anxiety of an inescapable fate and

the burden of domestic servitude while the poodle, in turn, shall endure life as a perverted absurdity of domestication. The woman appears to lament her predicament and we, the audience for this spectacle, begin to empathise. Conversely, despite its having been forcibly dragged by man's inbred hackery to a pitiable distance from any kind of sensible existence, we remain largely indifferent to the poodle. This, I would argue, is because the poodle is, like most of the animals encountered in Janušonis' sculpture and counter to nearly all of his human figures, indifferent to itself. The poodle does not pity itself, it does not lament its absurdity or its predicament and it does not contemplate its fate or the consequences of its actions. Rather, the animal knows only what it is compelled to do by its nature and, no matter how much one might twist it, that nature is irrevocable and fundamentally different from ours. People, because they are self-aware and self-domesticated, because they have twisted themselves, shall eternally suffer.

The lesson that the animals in Janušonis' work offer is, therefore, far different from those offered to us by the fables that inspire the artist. When Aesop's personified animals teach a morality, it is a distinctly human morality that can be arrived at only through human trials. What Janušonis' animals provide, whether they act as antagonist or protagonist, is the blank canvas of nature's moral vacancy. At times, man may project himself onto this canvas and in some way, perhaps, divide the burden of his conscience. At other moments, the vacuum grants humanity respite from the compulsive internal dialogue that passes as reason but which, in the artist's work, is indistinguishable from a chronic over-dramatisation of an innately conflicted self. The animal transforms its indifference into humanity's salvation and offers mankind the acceptance of its own absurdity as exoneration.

Alone in his studio, Janušonis hammers out the human condition. A more spacious, better-equipped facility might accommodate greater refinement in this effort, but Janušonis has given himself over to a liberated and deeply expressive way of working that befits his subject. Janušonis tears his forms out of the clay and finishes them off with a compassionate and redeeming grace. The artist's creative energy is both defiant and sensual as he opts out of formal concerns and works from impassioned and intuitive sensibilities. In the glazing process the artist is almost reckless, often randomly mixing glazes without testing and forced by the limitations of his studio to pour them over each individual figure. The pouring of glaze is a baptism and for Audrius Janušonis' figures, frozen as they are in a state of unrelenting conflict, it is their only chance for absolution.

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Above: ***March, April.*** *2001–2003. Red clay, engobe and glaze, smoke-fired. 55cm/h.*
Below: ***Early Frost (Faun Series).*** *2004. Red clay, engobe and glaze, fired to 1000°C.*